

Character Class

Sturdy Brawlers

Armor

By Skip Williams



Last time, we considered [weaponry for martial characters](#). Martial characters need more weaponry for successful careers, and we'll look into that now, starting with armor.

Managing Your Armor Class

When your character focuses on physical combat, you'll want to make your Armor Class as formidable as proves feasible for you. You can't go far wrong if you simply pile on armor and other defensive items and build up your Armor Class as high as you possibly can. Doing so, however, closes off many options for you.

As a rule of thumb, plan to spend at least 20%, and possibly as much as 40%, of your total wealth on armor and other defensive items. As noted last time, calculate your total wealth by adding up the costs of all your current equipment and the value your current cash. Do not count any non-portable assets you might have, such as buildings or land. Whenever you find that your total defensive gear's cost represents less than 20% of what you're carrying around (or could carry around), it's time to purchase new armor or a new shield or upgrade whatever you currently have. Similarly, when considering a new defensive item or an upgrade, rethink the purchase if it would leave you with more than 40% of your wealth tied up in defensive gear.

As a martial character, you should consider three kinds of defensive gear -- armor, shields, and miscellaneous defensive items such as *rings of protection* and *amulets of natural armor*. There's only one class of defensive items you should avoid -- *bracers of armor*. A suit of armor will give you considerably more protection at a lower price than any pair of bracers can. Bracers, however, might prove worthwhile for backup protection.

Armor

If your class gives you access to heavy armor, it's a good idea to wear the best heavy armor you can afford (keep in mind your budget for defensive gear discussed above). At the beginning of your career, that probably means splint or banded mail. Work your way up to full plate as soon as you can.

If you don't have access to heavy armor, it's a good bet that you have a few class abilities that heavy armor would nullify or degrade, so don't fret about it. Buy medium armor, such as chainmail or a breastplate instead.

If you're blessed with a high Dexterity score (as you might if you've chosen a race such as elf or halfling), pay attention to the maximum Dexterity bonus the armor you've chosen allows. If your armor keeps you from using your full Dexterity bonus, you might find yourself spending cash and getting almost no increase in protection. I say "almost no increase" because you'll eventually face combat situations where you'll lose your Dexterity bonus anyway -- when you're caught flat-footed, for example, when fighting an opponent you can't see, and many other situations. It's not always a waste to give up your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class in favor of something you can almost always rely on.

On the other hand, there are times when your armor won't protect you, such as when your foes use touch attacks against you. In such cases, you'll want to preserve as much of your Dexterity bonus as possible. Touch attacks are reasonably rare, however, so it's usually best to concentrate on your normal Armor Class. If you anticipate touch attacks, you can adjust your equipment accordingly.

Shield

Unless you plan to fight with both hands (using either a two-handed weapon or a weapon in each hand), a shield is a must. A heavy shield usually makes the most



sense. Most martial characters are proficient with these shields, and they provide a +2 shield bonus to Armor Class. If you choose a tower shield, you might need a feat for proficiency. Remember that you suffer a -2 penalty on attack rolls made while using it (see the tower shield description in Chapter 7 in the *Player's Handbook*).

As noted last time, you might want to opt for a smaller shield if you plan to use skills that are subject to armor check penalties. See [Part Two](#) for an overview of your options.

Magical Enhancements and Miscellaneous Items

Your armor and shield provide your basic defense. As you advance in level, you can begin purchasing magical items to pump up your Armor Class. Adding enhancements to your armor or shield is the cheapest way to improve your Armor Class with magic. Even better, the enhancements you add to your armor stack with enhancements to your shield to give you even better Armor Class.

Once you've acquired magic armor and shield, consider adding an item such as a *ring of protection* or *amulet of natural armor* for your next Armor Class increase. Adding one of these items is cheaper than increasing the enchantment on your armor or shield and can help you in other ways if you choose the right item. A *ring of protection*, for example, also improves your touch Armor Class because it gives you a deflection bonus. As a rule of thumb, add magical defenses in this order --

1. Armor or shield enhancement
2. *Ring of protection*
3. *Amulet of natural armor*

When you reach the bottom of the list, go back to the top and purchase a more powerful item. Keep in mind that there are other items you could add to this list -- a *dusty rose ioun stone*, for example. When considering alternate defensive items, look beyond Armor Class boosters from time to time. Picking up an item that forces your foes to take a miss chance can pay dividends for you, especially when you face a really tough foe who can hit your Armor Class anyway. Consider adding a *potion of blur* or *displacement* to your collection, or a *cloak of displacement* (major or minor) if you can afford it. Adding the fortification property to your armor or shield can help you escape critical hits and sneak attacks, both of which should prove helpful in the long run.

Backup Armor

If you sleep in medium or heavy armor, you're automatically fatigued the next day. If you plan to spend time in the wilderness or undertake any prolonged adventures in which you might find it necessary to sleep where enemies might attack during the night, it's a good idea to have a suit of light armor for sleeping. You can, of course, sleep in your medium or heavy armor and accept being fatigued the next day. When fatigued, you have a -2 penalty on Strength and Dexterity and can't charge or run, and that hits you where you live. You also could simply skip wearing armor when sleeping and hope you're not attacked before you get up. In any case, a look at Table 7-7 in the *Player's Handbook* should make it clear that you can't count on being able to climb into your armor quickly if someone attacks you at night. Even light armors take five rounds to don hastily, and the fight could be over by then. A suit of leather armor or even a chain shirt is worth having on hand for sleeping. If you're concerned about the weight of gear you're hauling around or you just don't like the idea of using armor as pajamas, *bracers of armor* are a decent (if less efficient) alternative.

Other Gear

Once you've seen to weapons and armor, you should have a few gold pieces left for other useful items. Here are a few extras that can really boost your martial potential.

Strength enhancements

Increasing your Strength score boosts your fighting prowess considerably, especially in melee. It also helps when breaking down doors and hauling loot. *Gauntlets of ogre power* or a *girdle of giant strength* would be a great investment for you if you have enough money left over after buying your armor and weapons. If you can't afford a permanent item, a *potion of bull's strength* is a decent alternative, if you're careful about when you use it.

Healing

You won't always have a divine spellcaster or other healer close by when you've suffered a great deal of damage (sometimes, even they get killed). Your collection of gear should include one or more potions of *cure light wounds*, which are very cheap and can keep you on your feet when you start running out of hit points. If you can afford it, also pack some more serious healing, such as a *potion of cure critical wounds* or a jar of *Keoghtom's ointment*.

Mental defenses

Most martial characters have weak or very weak Will saves, and that can be your Achilles heel. A *cloak of resistance* boosts all your saving throws. A *potion of owl's wisdom* brings many benefits -- a better Will save among them. A simple *protection from evil* spell stops many mind-affecting effects. Unfortunately, few items provide this bonus. You might consider a *ring of minor spell storing* loaded with a *protection from evil* spell cast by a friendly spellcaster, or perhaps you can hire a spellcaster to make a permanent *protection from evil* item for you.

Constitution enhancements

Though you have plenty of hit points, you can never have too many. An *amulet of health* would be an obvious choice, but it takes the same item slot as your all-important *amulet of natural armor*. Consider a *pink ioun stone* as an alternative. A *potion of bear's endurance* can give a useful but temporary Constitution boost for really tough battles. If you use it, remember that you'll lose the extra hit points you've gained when the potion wears off.

Haste effects

A *haste* spell improves your Armor Class, attack rate, Reflex saves, attack bonus, and speed. Consider a *potion of haste* or *boots of speed* when you can afford them.

A Final Word on Gear

We could go on for some time when considering a martial character's gear. However, you'll do pretty well if you've invested in a useful collection of weapons (see Part Two), a panoply of armor and other defensive gear, a Strength boost, and some healing.

Did you miss either of the two earlier columns in this series? If so, catch up now!

Part 1: [Martial Races](#)

Part 2: [Weapons and Fighting Styles](#)

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.